

The background and motives behind Park In Sook's re-defection to North Korea and our countermeasures

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It had been more than twenty days since Park In Sook (referred to as Park Jung Sook in the North Korean media) re-defected to North Korea after hearing news that her son, who had been left behind, was under threat. She had lived in South Korea since 2006 when she first entered the country to meet her father. However, on June 28th, the North Korean authorities extensively advertised Park In Sook's reentry in the form of a press conference with the presence of both local and international reporters. The North Korean authorities continue to use Park In Sook's re-defection as propaganda through the official media outlets. Thus, what are the background and motives behind the news conference sponsored by the North Korean authorities and large-scale propaganda featured in the official media?

First, there lies a recognition that the issue of North Korean defectors is an increasing political burden on the North Korean institutional systems. The number of people, who defected from the North to the South for better lives and freedom, exceeds 23,800. With the quantitative increases, there is also a qualitative challenge. There has been a sharp increase in the number of defectors settled in the South who also bring their families with them from the North. These families cross the North Korea-China border in order to settle in South Korea (and nowhere else) for a better future. North Korean authorities are increasingly concerned about the growing number of defectors because they perceive that one of the primary reasons for the demise of the socialist system in Eastern Europe, including East Germany, was due to the large-scale diaspora of their people. Moreover, the defectors are indispensable informants, who report

the deplorable living conditions and state of human rights violations in North Korea. In addition, the defectors spread the truth about South Korean society in the North through their families and personal ties. In all, the quantitative increase and the qualitative change in North Korean defectors, along with their role as informants, are a political burden to the North Korean regime. The recognition of this political burden has been exhibited through a control policy and punishment against the potential defectors, which have been enforced since the rise of Kim Jong-un. The North Korean authorities have also reinforced surveillance. For example, they deported the remaining family members of the refugees in order to control the defection. It appears that due to North Korea's policies against defectors, the number of those who moved to South Korea is 751 people as of the end of June, which demonstrates a 40% decline compared to the same period of last year.

Second, it can be analyzed that the reinforced surveillance within North Korea and the extensive propaganda regarding Park In Sook are intended to indirectly prevent its people from defecting. The North Korean authorities have devoted the majority of the time at the press conference with local and international journalists towards depicting Park In Sook's life in the South as miserable. However, contrary to this false portrayal, most of the defectors in South Korea have successfully settled into their new lives. The South Korean government is enthusiastically supporting the new refugees in accordance to the "North Korean Refugee Protection and Settlement Support Act," so that they can successfully adapt to the new environment. In particular, South Korea is improving Hana Regional Adaptation Centers, expert counselors and settlement assistants within the specific communities that the defectors are relocated. Concurrently, the South Korean government has established the "North Korean Refugees Foundation" in order to provide them with a comprehensive support system.

Third, North Korea's ambivalent attitude towards defectors was demonstrated at Park In Sook's press conference. Thus far, the North Korean authorities had denounced the refugees, condemning them as "traitors of the people" and "human trash" among other names. However, they adopted a divergent stance on the issue at the press conference and instead, suggested that the South Korean authorities' inhumane acts are accountable for the massive number of defections. During a conversation with the spokesman of Red Cross Central Committee of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on July 5, the North Korean authorities claimed the defections are the result of South Korea's "despicable acts of the luring and abduction of their citizens." Consequently, the refugees, who were once labeled as "trash," are now referred to as North Korean citizens who have fallen victim to coercion and abduction. North Korea is intentionally using the discussions at the Red Cross, an organization that advocates humanitarianism, to condone South Korea's inhumanity in an effort to maximize the allegations of its brutality.

Fourth and most importantly, North is actively using the re-defection of Park In Sook as propaganda to glorify Kim Jong Un. Although most of her time was devoted to depicting her life in the South as miserable, Park In Sook extensively mentioned the benevolence of Kim Jong Un at the press conference on June 28. Since then, North Korea's official media reports have focused on Park In Sook's improved living conditions in North Korea thanks to the benefits she receives from Kim Jong Un. According to a report by the Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) on July 5, Park In Sook was quoted stating, "The Dear

Leader Kim Jong Un did not hold the slightest grudge against my sinful past and embraced me with love and benevolence.” On July 10, the KCNA further emphasized that she and her family are living a much happier life with the release of another article titled, “Park Jung Sook – a woman who has returned to the embrace of the Republic and the life of her family.” Thus, the North Korean regime is taking advantage of the incident in order to propagandize Kim Jong Un’s benevolence.

As we have seen above, the North Korean authorities have political motives in extensively endorsing the Park In Sook incident. Therefore, South Korea must take caution against the proliferation of negative misconceptions from North Korean defectors. Rather, we should capitalize on this event to identify and address such concerns. We should also decisively recognize that the North Koreans who defect to the South for better future and greater freedoms are important assets to the unification of the two Koreas.

Above all, in regards to the preparations for the integration of the two Koreas, we will have to consider this incident as an opportunity to reflect on the problems amongst North Korean defectors in South Korea. Helping defectors successfully adapt to a new life in the South will be the stepping-stone towards unification. In order to effectively carry out such preparations for unification (which is the ultimate goal of supporting North Korean defectors) we must reinforce the systems that will help plan and mediate the related policies at the national level.

Furthermore, we have observed that the true motivation behind Park In Sook’s re-defection was due to North Korea’s threats against her son’s safety. There are countless others in the South who long to be reunited with their families and suffer from guilt for leaving them behind. Consequently, we should be more empathetic towards the North Korean defectors in this regard and also overcome our prejudice and discrimination against them among others. Although there are cases of maladjustment, most of the defectors have found relative success in rebuilding their lives as good citizens. Therefore, it is necessary that we further develop projects in order to better understand the North Korean defectors.